

BUYING HELP

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or you're wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us to provide a more accurate advice.

Chris Finnamore

Our Labs Manager can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

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Apple picking

Q I have just retired and I wish to buy a new computer. My existing PC is 11 years old. I have £900 to spend, and I will be using the computer for internet browsing, arranging photos, emailing and some minor office type work. I have had a look at the Apple Mac. I like that I can easily move it about the house, without having too many cables to remove and plug in. However, I do not have any experience of Apple Macs. What are your views?

Your magazine has given an award to Dell for best PC manufacturer. Would you suggest I get a Dell PC if the Apple Mac is not worth considering?

Malcolm Palmer

A If you just want to use your computer for general internet and office tasks, a Mac is worth considering. Macs are generally easy to use and reliable, and you don't have to worry about viruses and spyware as you do with a PC. The 20" iMac costs £800 including VAT. It is an integrated unit, so is fairly easy to move around the house. It doesn't come with any office software, though, so you'll need to spend around £46 on the iWork '08 office applications suite.

If portability is your main priority, you should consider a laptop. Apple's MacBook costs £700, but has a small 13" screen.



▲ RL Supplies' Modula 4300OC costs just £600 including VAT and is ideal for general computing tasks

The price of progress

Q I have a 3.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 processor, 2GB DDR RAM, an Asus P4V800D-X motherboard, an Nvidia GeForce 7800 GT 256MB graphics card, and Windows Vista Business.

The PC runs fine, but is ageing a little, and I'm thinking of upgrading. How does the 3.2GHz Pentium 4 compare to the Core 2 Duo? Should I stick with the Pentium and upgrade a few components, or build a new PC based on the Core 2 Duo? I enjoy playing games and worry that if I don't keep up to date I will not be able to play newer, more demanding titles.

Kevin Horne

A Although you have an older system, it's still pretty powerful and should be OK for current DirectX 9 games. However, the next generation of games will probably prove too much for it. You'll need a DirectX 10-compatible graphics card to

get the most from titles such as Crysis. While your motherboard has a PCI Express slot, it runs only at x4 speed and not the x16 speed required by the latest graphics cards, so you'll have to upgrade.

If you get a new motherboard, you'll be able to fit a Core 2 Duo processor. These are faster than your single-core Pentium 4 processor, and you'll see the difference as more games begin to support both cores. Our favourite Core 2 Duo processor is the E6750, while the Core 2 motherboard to get is Abit's IP35 Pro. The processor is £116 including VAT and the motherboard is £119 including VAT from www.scan.co.uk.

You'll also need some new DDR2 memory modules, as your current DDR memory is incompatible with the new motherboard. Corsair's TWIN2X2048-6400 2GB DDR2 kit, which won our Best Buy award in last month's *Labs*, costs just £50 including VAT from www.tekheads.co.uk.



◀ If you want to play the latest games in all their glory, you'll need a DirectX 10-compatible graphics card

English TV on a laptop

Q We spend some time in France at the beginning of each year, but there is no TV. We'd like to have something to watch in the evenings and also have access to the internet. We're thinking of buying a laptop with a 17" screen to watch DVDs, but would also like to watch TV, if possible. If we bought a USB TV tuner and a high-gain aerial, would we be able to view UK Freeview broadcasts in France?

Alan Walpole

A Unfortunately, it's not possible to receive UK digital television in France, even with a specialist aerial. While you can pick up medium- and long-wave radio broadcasts from the UK in France, you need to be much nearer to a digital TV transmitter to receive a good-enough signal.

If you have broadband internet access in France, it's possible to stream your TV over the internet to your notebook using a Sling Media



▲ If you have a fast enough internet connection, you can watch your home TV anywhere with the Slingbox

Slingbox Classic, which costs £100 including VAT from www.currys.co.uk. This takes the TV output from your set-top box and streams it to your notebook over the internet, so you can watch your home TV wherever you are in the world. You can even remotely change the channels on your home set-top box from your notebook. You'll need at least a 512Kbit/s broadband connection at your home in the UK and in France for the

Slingbox to work, though.

If you don't have broadband, get a laptop with a large screen and a pile of DVDs. You'll have to stretch your budget a bit to get a decent-sized screen. Toshiba's Satellite P200-17C, which is £699 including VAT from www.laptopsdirect.co.uk, won a Budget Buy award in *Shopper* 238. It has a large 17" widescreen display and good built-in speakers, so it is perfect for watching films.

Control two PCs with one set of peripherals

Q I'd like to buy a new PC base unit and set it up next to my current PC (a 1.8GHz Dell Dimension 8200 running Windows XP) so that it uses all the same peripherals. Ideally, I'd want both PCs to use the same Microsoft wireless keyboard and mouse, Canon's PIXMA MP750 printer, Netgear's DG834GT modem, Epson's Perfection 2400 scanner, Dell's 2005FPW monitor and Roland's MA-10A speakers. All these peripherals are very good, particularly the monitor, and I can't see why I should pay for new ones.

I know in some ways it makes sense just to buy a new base unit and totally replace the old one, but the old one still has great value for my rather IT-timid family, and they don't particularly want a change. Unfortunately, the current PC is getting too slow (Adobe Premiere Elements is almost unusable) and I like to keep up to date with Windows Vista and Office 2007 without mucking up settings for everyone else.

Gil Burrows

A Sharing your keyboard, mouse, monitor and speakers is fairly simple. A keyboard-video-mouse (KVM) switch consists of a main switch unit and two sets of cables. Plug your keyboard, mouse and monitor into the switch, and the cables from the switch into each PC. Then use the switch to choose which PC is connected to the keyboard and mouse, and displayed on the monitor. Belkin's 2-Port KVM Switch costs £22 including VAT from www.ebuyer.com/product/75772, but is compatible only with USB keyboards and mice.

It's easy enough to share your internet connection with the Netgear DG834GT, as it's an internet router. Just plug an Ethernet cable from the router into each PC. Sharing your scanner and printer is trickier. You can't share them with the KVM switch. The best thing to do is to set up your printer as shared on the network, so both PCs can print to it. You can't share a scanner over the network, so the best compromise is to leave the scanner plugged into the Windows XP PC, then share a folder on the Windows XP PC on the network. You can then save scans to the shared folder and access them from both PCs.



▲ A KVM switch is a simple way to share peripherals between two PCs

Home cinema advice

Q I've decided the time is right for a home cinema upgrade. I'd like to install a projector in my living room. The projector will be fixed to the ceiling, so portability and weight are not a problem. I'll need a projector that will connect to my laptop's D-sub video output, as well as my DVD player and Sky+ box. As the projector will be fixed to the ceiling, I'll need to be able to change between inputs with a remote control. Can you recommend a suitable projector for around £800?

David Grimwade

A As you're plugging the projector into a DVD player, you should buy a home cinema-specific projector, as this will natively support a widescreen aspect ratio for films. Most projectors have a D-sub input to plug into your laptop, but as you don't mention which outputs your Sky+ box and DVD player have it's hard to know which projector will be compatible. The only connector the Sky+ box and DVD player definitely will have is a SCART connector, so it's best to buy a projector with an S-video input and use a SCART-to-S-video converter lead. You can buy such a lead for around £20 from www.maplin.co.uk. The best home cinema projector in this month's *Labs* (see page 108) is Epson's EMP-TW680. It costs £664 including VAT from www.misco.co.uk. 



▲ BenQ's W500, which costs £688 including VAT from www.ebuyer.com